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PARIS FOR JORDAN; LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/13/2018

TAGS: PREL, PGOV, SY, IZ

SUBJECT: PREMATURE RUMORS OF ASIF SHAWKAT'S DEMISE

REF: DAMASCUS 142

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin, per 1.4 b,d.

1. (S) Summary: Widespread reports that Syrian Military Intelligence Chief Asif Shawkat is under house arrest and that Shawkat's wife (and Bashar Asad's sister) Bushra al-Asad is trying to flee the country likely reflect Bashar's successful moves to limit Shawkat's influence. While our sources suspect both stories are untrue and blame the external opposition for stirring the rumor mill to weaken Bashar, Shawkat's star definitely appears to be on the wane.  
End Summary

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The Rumor Mill Working Overtime  
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2. (SBU) Many Embassy contacts point to a report published by opposition website "Free Syria" as the original source of a number of news stories reporting Shawkat's house arrest. Sources here also contend that former Syrian VP (and now leader of the expat opposition group National Salvation Front) Abdel Halim Khaddam has attempted to weaken Bashar by repeating this rumor during recent anti-SARG interviews on SkyTV and Lebanese TV station al Moustaqbal in which he alleged Shawkat's house arrest and predicted Shawkat would suffer the same fate as now deceased head of Syrian intelligence operations in Lebanon, Ghazi Kanaan.

3. (SBU) Opposition website "al Haqiqa" published an April 6 story reporting that President Asad would replace Shawkat with SMI deputy Ali Yunis, a story similar to a "Debka" website report on Bashar's decision to fire Shawkat. Saudi daily "Sharq al Awsaat" reported Shawkat's house arrest; according to this version, Shawkat overstepped his authority in negotiating (via the Turks) with the USG about withdrawing Syria's support for Hizballah in exchange for agreement that the International Tribunal would not indict senior Syrian officials. Another version reported by the French-based opposition website "Ihraar Suriya" (the Free People of Syria) alleged that Shawkat had been implicated in the assassination plot against Hizballah leader Imad Mugniyah and that Hizballah and Iran were demanding his prosecution.

4. (C) Another rumor circulating in diplomatic circles (perhaps reflecting wishful thinking) is that Bashar has decided to turn Shawkat over to the International Tribunal for the murder of former Lebanese PM Rafiq Hariri in exchange for immunity.

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Bushra al-Asad to Flee the Country?  
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5. (C) Different stories regarding Shawkat's arrest also allege that his wife (and Bashar older sister) has or is attempting to leave the country and seek political asylum in possibly France or a Gulf country such as the UAE. The Kuwaiti daily "al-Siyasiya," for example, reported that Shawkat allegedly told his wife, Busra, to leave Syria with the couple's children, and she had applied for asylum in France (later denied by the French government, according to an April 13 story in "al Hayat.") According to a few contacts here, however, Bushra remains in Syria and her children are still attending school. A French Embassy contact told us that Bushra had been to Paris earlier in the year on a routine shopping excursion but there was no truth to stories that she had sought political asylum.

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Rumors Discounted Here  
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6. (SBU) In what many are viewing as a SARG response to the growing wave of rumors, an April 10 Syrian TV evening newscast showed footage of Shawkat attending a military academy graduation ceremony. The footage highlighted Shawkat

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wearing his military uniform and appearing with Minister of Defense Hasan Turkumani, who delivered the key note address. Meanwhile, pro-government Syrian website "Shafaf al-Sham" ran a story describing Shawkat as the "most powerful man in Syria" and reporting government plans to appoint Shawkat as Vice President for National Security Affairs. (Note: This position was a job briefly held by Bashar's paternal uncle Rifa't al-Asad before being exiled by the late Hafez al Asad.)

7. (S) Most of our contacts heavily discount reports of Shawkat's dismissal and house arrest. Well connected As-Safir correspondent Ziad Haydar called the reports "rubbish." Ihsan Sanker, a longtime Embassy contact who claims occasional access to Asad family members, reported April 10 seeing Shawkat at the funeral of a mutual friend a week earlier. According to Sanker, mutual acquaintances say they have seen Shawkat "regularly" over the last month.

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Shawkat's Star on the Decline?  
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8. (S) Describing Shawkat as "dejected and withdrawn," Sanker said Shawkat was "not even trying to hide" his unhappiness over his continuing loss of influence. The assassination of Hizballah luminary Imad Mugniyeh led to a series of accusations between SMI and GID, with the outcome coming out in GID's favor, Sanker reported. Additionally, Sanker said he had heard Shawkat's portfolio had been pared down to military issues, while Bashar's cousin Hafez Makhluaf had all but taken over the national security portfolio. As-Safir correspondent Haydar reported he had heard the same thing, saying Bashar had recently further marginalized Shawkat's national security role.

9. (S) Orient Center Director and MFA Advisor Samir al-Taki told us recently that Shawkat and GID chief Ali Mamluk had exchanged mutual recriminations of blame and negligence in the wake of the Mugniyeh assassination (reftel). In an attempt to discredit GID, Shawkat ordered SMI to question a number of Syrians with ties to France and the U.S. (including al-Taki) under possible suspicion of involvement in the Mugniyeh affair. In the meantime, al-Taqi added, the GID had

assumed primary responsibility for investigating the Mugniyeh killing, under the overall direction of Bashar's cousin, Hafez Makhluf, a prominent GID officer. Against the backdrop of these recent events, an ongoing reorganization of security organizations has made it difficult to determine who was up and who was down, al-Taqi explained. Separate reporting and diplomatic circles point to Mamluk's rise and Shawkat's relative retreat. But Al-Taqi cast doubt on reports of Shawkat's removal, saying "we've heard such reports before," only to see Shawkat maintain his position as a key insider.

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Shawkat in the Dog House?  
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10. (S) A UK-Syrian business contact with low level regime ties told us April 13 that Shawkat's problems with Bashar had come to head before the Arab League Summit. According to this source, SMI arrested a Saudi national suspected of involvement in the Mugniyeh assassination. This Saudi died in SMI custody, complicating Bashar's already strained relations with the Saudi royal family. A variant of this rumor which has appeared in the press was that the deceased Saudi was a diplomat working in the Saudi Embassy. Our contact discounted this rumor because "not even Shawkat would be stupid enough" to apprehend someone with diplomatic immunity.

11. (S) Comment: It seems highly unlikely that Bashar would arrest Shawkat unless he perceived a direct challenge to his authority, especially at a time when Syrians are openly talking about the possibility of war with Israel and worsening economic conditions that require greater regime cohesion. Moreover, we strongly doubt Bashar feels pressured

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enough on Lebanon to be preparing to turn over Shawkat to the Tribunal. Rather, we believe Bashar's continuing efforts to erode Shawkat's influence reflect his perception of Shawkat as a potential threat that must be managed. Separately, we assess that Bashar is most comfortable with Bushra here in Syria under his thumb and that he would not cause her to flee. We also believe that unless family matters worsen, Bushra prefers to reside in Syria, particularly given her desire to stay close to her elderly mother.

CORBIN

=====CABLE ENDS=====